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## REFORMATION & REVIVAL JOURNAL

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### A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

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## INFORMATION

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION THE TRINITY: WHAT AND WHY?

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*John H. Armstrong*

The doctrine of the Trinity has stood at the center of biblical and historical Christian faith almost from the beginning. Far from being an obscure dogma of confused early Christian theologians, or an unnecessary stumbling block to modern minds, this truth is indispensable to the true Christian revelation of God. If this truth goes, then our doctrine of God, Christ, sin and salvation all go.

Lest the reader think my last statement to be too inclusive I will provide an example of what I mean. If God has acted to redeem humanity in Jesus Christ in the way presented to us by the New Testament itself, what are the implications of this action? This is virtually the same question Athanasius asked in the fourth century. He biblically reasoned that if Christ saves sinners from sin then the reality of this action far exceeds the capacity of human language to capture it adequately. Christ must be God since, according to the biblical witness, only God can save. If this is true then Jesus reveals and explains God, once and for all. And if Jesus is God, and the Father and Holy Spirit are also God, then the reality we are faced with must be something like the doctrine of a tri-unity of persons who are all equally God. Yet the Bible is *equally* clear that there is only one God.

St. Augustine's classic definition of the Trinity stands to our day as clear and wise. "So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; and yet they are not three gods, but one God." It is right that we ask *one* "what" and *three* "whos" if we are to comprehend Augustine's affirmation. The Council of Nicea, wrestling with this truth, confessed the Son to be of "one substance [or essence] with the Father." Harold O. J. Brown writes:

By introducing the term "subsist," theology seeks to show that the Trinity is not to be demystified by resorting to inapplicable comparisons. If one were to say, for example, that God consists of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, this might appear to suggest that God has three parts. . . . God does not consist of parts, but subsists in Persons. These Persons are distinguished from one another by means of a relationship . . . but not by succession in time.<sup>1</sup>

### EVANGELICAL HISTORY AND THE TRINITY

For well over a century evangelicals have given scant attention to the doctrine of the Trinity. Sadly, this has not been an accident. After heated battles with Unitarianism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, those who loved the gospel were particularly committed to spreading their faith across the world and tended to assume the truth of God's being. With the noted exception of B. B. Warfield, the arguments advanced for the Trinity by evangelical scholars, at least until quite recently, were quite often a repetition of Augustine's earlier work in the field. (Calvin made some serious developments in his treatment of this doctrine and this particularly fostered Warfield's seminal restatement of Calvin's thought.) Though Augustine had deeply struggled with this subject, new issues related to the person and being of God arose in the twentieth century that were allowed to go virtually unchallenged by evangelical theologians and teachers.

Evangelical theologian Gerald Bray correctly laments this present situation:

Even today, it must be said that theologians in the Reformed tradition have scarcely managed to take Warfield's arguments on board, let alone develop them in any serious way. Evangelicals who are not in the Reformed tradition are even less well off; as far as one can see, most of them have hardly

given the subject a moment's thought. Certainly there is no literature on the Trinity emanating from these circles that could even begin to compare with the vast tomes on dispensationalism, for instance, or spiritual gifts.<sup>2</sup>

While the evangelical world simply assumed the doctrine of the Trinity, European theology entered into a time of great struggle and shift in the last century. Thankfully, through the massive efforts of Karl Barth (1886-1968), the doctrine was put back on the church's everyday agenda where it belonged. Bray properly suggests that Barth "almost single-handedly rescued the doctrine of the Trinity from the neglect it had suffered since the time of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who had reduced it to an appendix of his dogmatics."<sup>3</sup>

### EVANGELICALS TODAY: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY?

Sadly, modern evangelicals still have little time or place for serious interaction with, and reflection upon, the doctrine of the Trinity. Our preoccupation with everything from revivalism to church growth has almost sterilized our schools and churches to serious doctrinal reflection, especially in written form. Gerald Bray has ventured several reasons for why this is the case.

First, he mentions the obvious decline of theology in our midst. With the loss of the older, and richer, Princeton theology into a more modern "arid scholasticism" combined with our populist tendencies to "sniff out 'heresy' every time somebody comes up with a new idea" modern evangelicals seem fearful and tentative when it comes to serious discussion of this doctrine. I believe this explains, to some extent, why popular evangelical publications such as *Christianity Today*, treat the "openness of God" proposal of people like Gregory Boyd (cf. Roger Nicole, "A Review Arti-

cle: God of the Possible," *Reformation & Revival Journal*; Volume 10, No. 1, 167-194) with such an even-handed approach. What this does, of course, is put "openness" proposals about the nature of God on equal footing with historical orthodoxy, as if both approaches were valid ways for evangelicals to speak about God.<sup>4</sup>

Second, Professor Bray argues that an emphasis upon telling biblical stories, including "so-called Biblical theology," to the *exclusion* of systematic theology has caused serious harm. As an example, some are strangely uncomfortable with the word Trinity since it is never found within the pages of the Bible itself!

Third, there has been an enormous emphasis upon evangelism, which has produced remarkable growth in many of our churches. The sad result, however, has been an over simplification of serious theological language and concept. "Doctrine appears to be a diversion for intellectuals and is potentially dangerous."<sup>5</sup> Discussions of the Trinity do not matter, at least for the growth of the church, which is plainly the important thing in our time.

Fourth, Bray suggests that the increase in what might be called "charismatic" worship and practice in evangelical churches and movements "has tended to dull people's interest in intellectual matters."<sup>6</sup> Bray suggests that even though charismatic worship styles might make frequent reference to the Holy Spirit as God, and to Jesus as well, our loss is still profound. He concludes:

The overall effect [of such worship and practice] is to stress practice over principles, with the result that in some circles "being filled with the Spirit" may now mean barking uncontrollably like a dog (as in the so-called "Toronto blessing") and has little, if anything, to do with any kind of biblical faith.<sup>7</sup>

The result of this *new* evangelical paradigm, which is really quite old since it is rooted in nineteenth century revivalism, is that the doctrine of the Trinity is of little or no importance to modern evangelical Christians. Given our distaste for liturgical traditions, where the doctrine is kept central at least in worship, we do not know exactly what to do with this truth. Is it really important? Truthfully, does it really matter? Why, or why not? What are we to make of this historic doctrinal truth, which cost the early church so dearly?

### CONCLUSION

I tend to be a student of current church trends in North America. I travel widely, visiting local churches of all types and sizes. I see lots of changes, in style, structure, and modes of communication. Worship has been, and still may continue to be for some time, a battleground for most evangelicals. (One wonders if the "contemporary" form has not so radically altered the landscape that the battle is actually over! Now we are simply deciding how to manage the acceptance of what is called "contemporary" worship.) Some of this alteration is helpful, perhaps even necessary. What troubles me deeply, however, is the absence of meaningful discussion about God in the midst of this change. We have actually come to think that the Bible is primarily about us. We then reason that the church is also about us. Surely the future then must be about us. Indeed, everything finally relates to us. We are the consummate "me generation." God is there for us!

What is the answer to this colossal aberration? I answer, without hesitation, the recovery of the mystery and wonder of the triune God of the Bible. This recovery must inevitably begin with a healthy dose and thoughtful understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity because this is who God really is.

The major reason this is true is that we have a distorted view of persons. A spate of recent serious books on the doc-

trine of the Trinity offers some hope, at least at the academic level, that this might be changing. Christopher Hall has captured the sense of this relationship of understanding persons to the doctrine of the Trinity.

When Christians speak of God as three "persons," for example, what do we mean? Can we equate what North Americans understand of a "person" to be with what early church fathers meant by the term in formulating the doctrine of the Trinity? Most assuredly not. Roderick Leupp comments that American culture "values the single and the solitary. But the typical American prescription for mature selfhood—symbolized by the cowboy, the mountain man, the business mogul, the entertainer who 'did it my way'—is flawed and skewed."<sup>8</sup>

If there is anything that needs redefining and explaining to modern evangelicals it is how they understand themselves. What Christopher Hall is saying is we can only come to understand ourselves in the light of the full revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity. He thus adds:

When we speak of God as three persons, what do we mean? . . . surely not three isolated individuals. If such were the case, Christianity would indeed be a polytheistic religion. Instead, what if the divine nature manifests genuine personhood only in relationship or communion with another person, as Christoph Schwedel phrases it, "in freedom and love"? Rather than the divine persons existing as isolated, autonomous selves, they would then find their distinctiveness in their relationship of communion one with another. What if genuine personhood shared within the divine nature provides a fundamental model for understanding human nature and other social relationships? What if the primal source and paradigm for all personhood is to be found in the loving network of relationships that have existed always between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? What if God's won-

drous saving act to redeem humanity from sin manifests those relationships to us and thereby invites the church to ever deeper meditation, prayer, worship, and adoration?<sup>9</sup>

St. Athanasius understood clearly what I fear few modern Christians have ever given serious thought to.

The more I desire to write and endeavor to force myself to understand the divinity of the Word, so much the more did the knowledge thereof withdraw itself from me; and in proportion as I thought that I had apprehended it, in so much I perceived myself to fail of doing so. Moreover also, I was unable to express in writing even what I seemed to myself to understand, and that which I wrote was unequal to the imperfect shadow of the truth which existed in my conception.<sup>10</sup>

In our rush for simplicity, and for a myriad of answers "that work," could it be we are missing the essence of the Christian faith in the process? C. S. Lewis astutely observed, in *Mere Christianity*, that "we cannot compete in simplicity with people who are inventing religions. How could we? We are dealing with fact. Of course, anyone can be simple if he has no facts to bother about."<sup>11</sup>

I wonder, honestly, if evangelicals realize that they cannot make true religion fit into the mold of every modern thought form they like. To try to do so is the end of serious, God-centered, full-orbed historic Christianity. Returning to the doctrine of the Trinity, in both daily conversation and private prayer, as well as in public worship services, will go a long way toward reforming the modern church if we have the desire to undertake the challenge. May God give us such desire.

### Notes

1. Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 89.
2. Gerald Bray, "Evangelicals Losing Their Way," in *The Compromised Church*, John H. Armstrong, editor. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1998), 54.
3. *The Compromised Church*, 54.
4. *Christianity Today*, Volume 45, Nos. 7 and 8, May 28 and June 11, 2001. "Does God Know Your Next Move?" An exchange between openness proponent John Sanders and a traditional theologian, Christopher A. Hall.
5. *The Compromised Church*, 56.
6. *The Compromised Church*, 56.
7. *The Compromised Church*, 56.
8. Christopher Hall, "Adding Up the Trinity" in *Christianity Today*, April 28, 1997, 27.
9. "Adding Up the Trinity," 27-28.
10. "The Life of Saint Athanasius," quoted in *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation*. (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 21.
11. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 145.

God, our Father, we adore Thee! We, Thy children, bless  
Thy name!

Chosen in Christ before Thee, we are "holy, without  
blame."

We adore Thee! We adore Thee! Abba's praises we  
proclaim!

We adore Thee! We adore Thee! Abba's praises we  
proclaim!

Son eternal, we adore Thee! Lamb upon the throne on  
high!

Lamb of God, we bow before Thee, Thou hast brought Thy  
people nigh!

We adore Thee! We adore Thee! Son of God, who came to  
die!

We adore Thee! We adore Thee! Son of God, who came to  
die!

Holy Spirit, we adore Thee! Paraclete and heavenly guest!  
Sent from God and from the Savior, Thou hast led us into  
rest.

We adore Thee! We adore Thee! By Thy grace forever blest;  
We adore Thee! We adore Thee! By Thy grace forever blest!

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—Three in One, we give Thee  
praise!

For the riches we inherit, heart and voice to Thee we raise!  
We adore Thee! We adore Thee! Thee we bless, thro' end  
less days!

We adore Thee! We adore Thee! Thee we bless, thro' end  
less days!

GEORGE W. FRAZER (1904)